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Report From London

Was CIA Involved in Tshombe Incident?

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Special to The News

LONDON — It seems clear now, from information which I have received from more than one source, that the CIA was implicated in the kidnaping of Moise Tshombe. At the very least, senior CIA representatives in Kinshasa, the Congolese capital, must have known that the snatch was imminent, and their influence with President Mobutu is such that they could certainly have prevented it if they had wanted to.



TSHOMBE

The kidnaping was organized by Mobutu's government; there can be no doubt about that whatsoever. And the CIA — sometimes in opposition to the State Department — has been, from the start, Mobutu's chief and indispensable backer.

Mobutu reckoned that his position would never be secure while Tshombe remained alive and at liberty — with large Swiss bank accounts to draw on. He was right. Prior to the kidnaping, Tshombe was considering two different schemes for an armed coup which would restore him to power; and, I'm told, he had just decided on the one he meant to try.

His personal security was bad. A previous kidnaping attempt had narrowly failed, and a more prudent conspirator

would not have taken what seems to have been an unnecessary flight, in dubious company, on the hijacked plane.

The idea was that he should be whisked straight through Algeria, produced spectacularly in Kinshasa and executed before anyone had time to make a fuss.

This plan came unstuck for two reasons: Because the copilot managed to transmit a message and because the plane was met in Algeria by a junior officer who talked.

So the Algerian government, unable now to pretend that it knew nothing about Tshombe, determined to ask a high price for its embarrassing captive — that Mobutu should switch his support from Israel to the Arabs, break with the West and lean toward the Communists; and, as immediate evidence of his intentions, that he should amnesty the Simbas, the communist rebels.

This price was probably unacceptable to Mobutu and certainly to his CIA backers. Hence the long stalemate, while desperate negotiations continued beneath the surface. Meanwhile there are reports of new recruiting among Tshombe's former mercenaries in South Africa, Rhodesia and Europe. Mobutu's government is not a good insurance risk.

It's a distasteful story, the more so since Tshombe is the nearest thing to a great man which the unhappy Congo has produced and he is — or was — more or less on our side.

The CIA's equivocal position derives from the same mistake which caused America to help the United Nations destroy independent Katanga.

Only a few weeks ago American repre-

sentatives in Kinshasa were saying blandly that no one except his family would mourn if Tshombe disappeared. They were quite wrong. Katanga is held down by armed force, and there could easily be another secession.

I don't blame the CIA for taking a hand in Congolese affairs. I don't believe, as some people do, that it would ever have been possible, or is now possible, to isolate black Africa from the global struggle between East and West.

America, Russia and China have all burned their fingers in the Congo; the Congo is that sort of place.

But the Simbas were using Czechoslovak and Chinese weapons and latterly were trained by Cuban guerrilla experts. If the West hadn't backed the anticommunists with money and equipment and, indirectly, with mercenaries, there would simply have been a communist take-over, another Cuba, another Zanzibar.

It's a rough game, and the CIA has to play it roughly. But, apart from the ethics of conniving at Tshombe's kidnaping and potential execution, I am doubtful about the expediency.

The argument for it was presumably the same as the argument for crushing Katanga—that the Congo needs stability and the central government cannot survive without a secure grip on the Katangese copper mines. Now for the first time, however, the CIA may be backing the wrong horse.

In both cases, most of the gloating and rejoicing has been done by the enemies of the West. This is not, it seems to me, a reassuring sign.